
Brands in International and Multi-Platform Expansion Strategies: Economic and Management Issues

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Abstract

Powerful media branding has historically facilitated successful international expansion on the part of magazine and other content forms including film and TV formats. Multi-platform expansion is now increasingly central to the strategies of media companies and, as this chapter argues, effective use of branding in order to engage audiences effectively and to secure a prominent presence across digital platforms forms a core part of this. Drawing on original research into the experience of UK media companies, this chapter highlights some of the key economic, management and socio-cultural issues raised by the ever-increasing role of brands and branding in the strategies of international and multi-platform expansion that are increasingly commonplace across media.

Keywords

Multi-platform • Internationalisation • Expansion • Economic exploitation • Magazines

1 Introduction

As digital technology has transformed the infrastructure of media distribution, one of the main ways that content suppliers have chosen to achieve growth and renewal in recent years has been through extending their goods and services into new and additional markets. Strategies of international expansion and also of cross-platform and multi-platform expansion have become common-place. At a time of expanding media provision and choice for consumers, branding has become an ever-more vital

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component within the strategic armoury of media managers (Ots, 2008; Siegert, Gerth, & Rademacher, 2011).

Drawing on the findings of a major ESRC-funded project¹ which investigates how media companies have made the journey from being single sector to digital multi-platform suppliers of content, this chapter focuses on the role of brands in facilitating this transition. The analysis presented draws on interviews with current and former senior managers at a range of leading UK media companies including *News UK* (formerly News International), *Telegraph Media Group*, *Hearst UK*, *Future Publishing*, *EMAP*, *BBC*, *ITV*, *UKTV* and *Viacom International Media Networks*. This chapter assesses some of the key economic, management and socio-cultural issues raised by the ever-increasing emphasis on brands and branding which, in recent years, have gone hand in hand with a widespread adoption of strategies of multi-platform expansion.

Branding and segmentation of market demand have long been at the heart of the business of magazine publishing and major publishing houses such as *IPC* in the UK, *Condé Naste* or *Hachette* in France, *Bauer* in Germany or *Time Warner* in the US are adept in harnessing brands as a means of achieving expansion across geographic territories. However in the twenty-first century the process of assessing the viability of media brands that are aimed at specific market segments and of calculating the likely profile of returns over the expected life of that brand involves, typically, looking not only at international markets but also, more fundamentally, at the opportunities which delivery across multiple digital distribution platforms may provide. Full exploitation of the brand image associated with, say, a magazine title typically involves extension of that branded content property across a range of delivery platforms and devices, fixed and mobile, and sometimes into complementary product and service markets (such as, for example, organisation of trade fairs), as well as, for many, expansion into international markets.

Multi-platform growth is increasingly central to the strategies of not only magazines but all other media companies and, as this chapter argues, successful use of branding in order to engage audiences effectively and to secure a prominent presence across digital platforms forms a core part of this. For multi-platform media suppliers, branding shapes day-to-day operational decisions about content and business planning. The experience of leading players in the UK media sector suggests that the need for high impact brands is affecting how content is selected, produced, presented and managed. The ascent of branding raises potential questions about standardization of content at the expense of range and diversity (see also Rohn, 2015). Even so, as this chapter concludes, the economic logic that underpins use of brands to support multi-platform expansion is highly compelling and

¹ This is a UK Economic and Social Research Council-funded project (ES/J011606/1) entitled 'Multi-platform media and the digital challenge: strategy, distribution and policy'. Principal Investigator: Gillian Doyle; Co-Investigator: Philip Schlesinger; Research Associate: Dr. Katherine Champion. The PI conducted all cited interviews except those with staff at *Elle* and with the Senior Marketing Director of Future Publishing which were carried out by the RA.

therefore branding techniques will remain at the fore in promoting the competitive positioning of media companies in the digital era.

2 Brands and Internationalization

In a world of abundant and ever-growing media provision, brands make the process of decision-making easier for consumers (Chan-Olmsted, 2006). Recognisable, memorable brands help products stand out and foster loyalty. Earlier work in media economics and media management has highlighted how, in magazine publishing, the importance of branding has been well understood for many years (Cox & Mowatt, 2008; Picard, 2011). The main asset owned by a magazine and the core source of its strength is its title or, more accurately, the brand associated with its title (Doyle, 2013).

Magazine publishers have been well ahead of rivals in other sectors in recognizing that strategies of branding plus segmentation of market demand into narrow niches work in a complementary way (Doyle, 2013). Branding helps publishers engage with and sustain ongoing relationships with specific audience segments (Davidson, McNeill, & Ferguson, 2007). Consumer and business magazines put great effort into the creation of distinctive brand images which ensure loyalty and repeat purchases or habitual engagement on the part of readers and users (Gasson, 1996). If a brand is strong enough it will frequently have some appeal for the same lifestyle group or niche in many different international geographic markets, albeit that some adaptation at the local level may be required (Doyle, 2006). And, on account of their reliance on visual material, magazines are often relatively easy to adapt for additional language markets.

Branding techniques, although strongly associated with magazine publishing, are also a prevalent feature in other sectors of the media including, for example, the television content business where, as with magazines, perfecting and then adhering to a winning formula provides a good basis for expansion into additional territories (Steemers, 2004; Tungate, 2005). International trade in television formats is a growing industry and one which is dominated by strongly branded entertainment and game shows such as *Who wants to be a Millionaire*, *Masterchef* and *Pop Idol* (Esser, 2010). Branding is important not only in promoting specific television shows but also channels (Stipp, 2012). This is acknowledged, for example, by the General Manager of UKTV's channel called *Dave* which, until it was rebranded in 2007, went under the name *UKTV G2*:

when we launched *Dave* ... a big part of our objective when we were branding was we need to stand out in a crowded marketplace. At that point, there were 400 TV channels. There's now 450 TV channels in the marketplace. We need to find a way of standing up amongst those channels. How do we do that? So part of the reason '*Dave*' worked was because it's different and it's a bit like 'Why?' (Interview, April 24, 2014)

So branding is widespread across the media but, in magazine publishing, the business of developing and harnessing strong brands has a very long history.

In order to widen the international readership for a magazine, its parent company will frequently adopt a strategy of publishing several different international versions (Cabell & Greehan, 2005). Use of a contract-based approach is a popular model whereby, instead of setting up numerous wholly owned subsidiaries in other countries, the brand owner enters into licensing or franchising agreements with a number of local publishing partners. Franchising minimizes many of the risks and costs involved (Deresky, 2006). Sustaining a growing network of international local publishing partners can, however, involve complexity, not least in relation to sustaining control over the brand (Doyle, 2006).

It may be argued that differences in tastes and preferences amongst international audiences are gradually being eroded by processes of globalization which magazines and other transnational media have responded to but, also, which they have accelerated (Cabell & Greehan, 2005; Chalaby, 2005). Much earlier work in cultural studies has adopted a critical stance in relation to the role played by internationalization of media in global cultural exchange (Giddens, 1991; Tomlinson, 1991). Even so, the processes involved in extending a cultural brand across numerous different international settings can involve challenges that are especially demanding (Esser, 2010; Hafstrand, 1995; Sánchez-Tabernero, 2006). The experience of transnational magazine publishers such as *Hearst*, *Bauer* etc. would certainly suggest that cultural variations from one region to another are very far from extinct, and so questions around local adaptation are very much on the managerial agenda (Doyle, 2006). Awareness of the particularities of local tastes and values which local publishing partners bring is essential in avoiding offensive or embarrassing editorial misjudgements. So, a very significant managerial challenge for transnational brand-owners is that of striking the right balance between protecting and preserving the integrity of the core brand versus allowing partners sufficient editorial and operational latitude to implement whatever adaptations they feel are needed at local level (Doyle, 2006).

3 Transition to Multi-platform

Strong brands have not only underpinned international expansion but also expansion across different media platforms and devices such as tablets and mobile phones (Küng, 2008; Ots, 2008). Declining advertising revenues have encouraged more and more print titles to reposition themselves as multi-platform entities (Duffy, 2013). But the re-cycling of strong content brands across a range of delivery platforms is a strategy that is visible across all sectors of the media (McDowell, 2006; Murray, 2005). Indeed, many media publishing businesses are now explicitly structured around the high profile cross-media brands which they own rather than, as might have been the case in the past, according to what sort of activities they are engaged in (e.g. magazine publishing or broadcasting). The homepage of *Bauer*,²

² Accessed on 1 March, 2014 at: <http://www.bauermedia.co.uk>

one of the largest consumer magazine publishers and radio broadcasters in the UK, currently describes the company at the homepage of its website thus:

We have more than eighty influential media brands, spanning a wide range of interests, including... Our business is built on millions of personal relationships with engaged audiences. We connect people and communities with compelling and quality content, whenever, wherever and however they want.

The adoption of a more platform-neutral approach that places emphasis on ownership of brands and on the role that brands play in engaging and sustaining relationships with audiences signals an ongoing shift, propelled partly by digitization and growth of the internet, in publishers' conceptions of what their business is centrally about. Whereas the tangible glossy print product was once the primary and sole focus, many leading UK publishers now report that they see their business as being, at root, about devising and building up successful titles or content brands, using those brands to develop close and loyal relationships with target customers, and then translating the brand experience across different technological and market settings. This sentiment is encapsulated by the Chief Executive Officer of *Hearst Magazines UK* thus:

We are not a publisher. We are an entertainer. Our job is to create a business which is diversified and will enable a connection with our audience around our different brands. . . We want the print experience to be one among many other connections and touch points. (Arnaud de Puyfontaine, CEO of *Hearst Magazines UK*, 2012)³

Such a re-conceptualisation of what the business of supplying media entails and of the increasingly centrality of brands is by no means confined to magazine publishers. Since the arrival of the internet, many media organisations have migrated towards a so-called multi-platform approach to supplying content (Doyle, 2013). This both reflects and responds to how digital distribution platforms have changed the consumption behaviours of audiences, opening up numerous new opportunities in relation to capturing and sustaining audience attention.

The term 'multi-platform' involves an approach towards production and distribution in which the aim is to engage audiences across multiple platforms or avenues, rather than just one. Multi-platform publishing involves what the Managing Director of Commercial at *News UK* (formerly News International), publisher of several leading daily newspaper titles in the UK, calls 'multiple touch points' in how readers want to consume news content. The importance of brands in securing a foothold with audiences across multiple digital platforms is explained by the CEO of *Hearst Magazines UK* thus:

As we move from 'one-to-many' to 'one-to-one' communication... our competitive advantage is based on being the owner of brands. One of their expressions is a weekly or monthly magazine. That's fine but it is less and less compelling. [The business] we are

³ Arnaud De Puyfontaine speaking at 'Hearst Magazines 2012 & Beyond' <https://soundcloud.com/icrossing-uk/arnaud-de-puyfontaine-hearst>

currently building around these brands is much more comprehensive (Interview, July 22, 2013)

4 New Relationships with Audiences

According to recent data from UK communications regulator *Ofcom*, “just over half (53 %) of all UK adults are regular media multi-taskers, i.e. they ‘stack’ or ‘mesh’ while watching TV weekly or more often” (*Ofcom*, 2013, p. 4). Changes in media consumption habits are particularly evident amongst the young who have embraced media multi-tasking very readily. This is well understood at, for example, *MTV UK* where, because of the youthful profile of target audiences, its management needs to be fully attuned and alert to changing modes of consumption. As a Senior Vice-President of *Viacom International Media Networks (VIMN)* explains:

When we think about the business, we think about where the audience is at. And our audience—16–24 year olds primarily—are multi-tasking. They use instant messenger, and texting, and they’ve got their laptop open whilst they’re watching TV. They watch TV, they chat, they social network, they do all those things and they do it all at the same time. So if we were to continue to grow our business there’s no point saying ‘let’s make a great TV show and then put a bit of content online’—it just doesn’t work. (Interview, 12 February, 2009)

Another *VIMN* Executive with responsibility for Content and Programming at *MTV* agrees that, where younger audiences are concerned, appetites for television content are now expressed in terms of demand for engagement with specific shows, content brands and characters across an array of digital platforms and devices. For younger audiences, watching television—the linear transmission—although a significant part of the experience, is by no means all, and therefore content needs to be portable:

For young audiences, portability is everything. Yes, they will watch stuff on linear, but at the same time they will be watching it on iPad, Sky+, Video on Demand. It’s about the programme *brand*. If they love something... and have that emotional connection, they will find it when they want it and they will come to it wherever they want it. (Interview, 21 October, 2011)

In the contemporary media environment where audiences enjoy a plethora of competing multi-platform offerings, branding has become a vital propeller for the success of individual content properties and suppliers. Across the board, most if not all media organisations recognize that, in a much more crowded and competitive landscape, the ability to form and sustain the kind of relationship with your audience where they actually want to find and follow your content represents a key advantage.

It is widely understood that construction of closer or more intense relationships establishes a means through which particular audience segments or constituencies of interest can be encouraged to seek out preferred content brands across differing platforms and delivery formats. The fact that effective use of branding is integral to

the process of forming such relationships is acknowledged by managers in the non-commercial as well as the market sector. At the BBC, one of the vectors via which the organization has sought to become proficient in the use of multiple digital delivery channels is its youth-orientated television service *BBC Three*. The Controller of *BBC Three* acknowledges that two-way connectivity on digital platforms and judicious use of social media allows television channels to:

create an active community of people who enjoy your brand and engage with it. . . That's very much what the social media team are doing—they are talking about shows with them, answering questions. They're giving the channel a personality. (Interview, 22 January, 2014)

Thus, the task of channel controllers and of commissioning schedulers has changed greatly and likewise the competencies needed to perform these roles in ways that harness digital platforms effectively are different. The Controller of *BBC Three* suggests that “we need to be much better at engaging in conversation with the audience” (see Ots & Hartmann, 2015; Wolter, 2015). The Head of Content and Programming at *MTV UK* confirms that the role of the television channel manager has become more focused on identifying what sort of content ideas will work for a brand across multiple distribution platforms and how those platforms can be used to secure audience engagement over an extended time period:

We don't see ourselves now as a traditional broadcaster—we see ourselves as a brand and our content is a part of a brand experience and our brand is on different platforms. . . (Interview, 21 October, 2011)

5 Strategic Brand Management

A more competitive multi-platform environment has encouraged media suppliers to pay much more attention to ensuring that audiences, readers and user-groups understand clearly and accurately what sort of the experiences and content their imprimatur promises to deliver. Powerful media brands are pivotal in strengthening the association between a content service or bundle such as a television channel and the character of its content, as is acknowledged by the General Manager of two of the most prominent of UKTV's television channels:

Having brands is a shortcut for people to go: “Do you know what? I like *Eastenders* we'll go to BBC iPlayer. Or I like *Coronation Street*, I'll go to ITV . . .” (Interview, April 24, 2014)

Maintaining the integrity of a brand calls for strict control over how it becomes translated from one context to another (Keller, 2013). Protecting the integrity of media brand as it migrates across multiple delivery platforms involves careful control over the character and tone of that product or service. The General Manager of UKTV channel *Dave* confirms that content selection is strongly directed by branding considerations:

as the world's gotten bigger we still are very strict in the shows that we'll buy from a brand point of view (Interview, April 24, 2014)

In the world of magazine publishing, it is also recognized that, in an increasingly competitive market context, establishing a brand identity that is clear and consistent is vital. The importance of protecting the integrity of the brand and of maintaining a consistent tone across different delivery platforms is emphasized, for example, by the Content Director of *Elle* UK who says:

Elle has to sound like *Elle* whether it's a 3-page feature in the magazine or a 50 word piece on lipstick at the site (Interview, 12 September, 2013)

Likewise, according to the Senior Marketing Executive of Future Publishing, owner of *Total Film*:

we are quite careful.. that its the same *Total Film* voice you will hear in the magazine and on the website—*Total Film* are very protective of that (Interview, 6 December, 2013)

However, publishers not only need to maintain the consistency of their brand but, also, to adjust their content offerings to suit the specific delivery platform in question. This can create conflicts. For instance, the need for immediacy on digital platforms can at times conflict with the ambition of maintaining a consistently authoritative and reliable voice. According to the Editor-in-Chief of *Elle* UK:

Every piece of content must be thought through: why is it going out, what's the point of it and what are we doing and is the right tone? We had a terrible issue with tone for about a year. . . . Not everybody is good at social media. It was just that sort of sensing who had it and who didn't and who could make sure it represented the brand. (Interview, 11 September, 2013)

6 Brands and Economic Exploitation of Intellectual Property

Whatever the challenges involved, there remains a very strong economic case in favour of extending consumption of a media product or service through means of making minor adaptations to a basic or standard formula so it then appeals across additional delivery platforms and/or in additional geographic markets. Expansion of *any* sort of product on this basis will generally be advantageous because of the low investment risks and high economies of scale and scope involved. But expansion of media products is especially advantageous because, where media content is concerned, the raw material being shared across different platforms and different international versions—the intellectual property which is the core ingredient—once it has been created then costs little to reproduce. The same story, and/or variations of it, can be 'sold' to multiple different audiences around the globe and across multiple delivery platforms without its value ever being impaired or diminished. Hence the basic economic rationale in favour of harnessing the techniques of branding, where these serve to support and facilitate international and cross-platform expansion of a media product or service, is especially compelling.

At root, the opportunity to exploit intellectual property assets more fully is what drives strategies of multi-platform and international expansion in the media industry. One of key advantages driving incumbent media firms towards multi-platform distribution is the ability to squeeze more *value* out of content by vastly increasing the opportunities to consume that content which are presented to audiences. But since the economic viability of multi-platform content publishing depends not only on the marginal value for audiences but also the marginal productions costs involved, it is no surprise that very many (though not all) media suppliers have pushed towards converged or joint production of multi-platform outputs where feasible. The standard expectation of journalists working at most leading UK magazine and newspaper titles is that copy will be produced for print, fixed digital and mobile platforms (Doyle, 2014; McKay, 2013).

Multi-platform publishing routinely entails the generation of multiple versions of narratives out of individual stories and content properties. Re-cycling of content across additional audience segments is not new. But, in the context of the digital environment, with much wider distribution capacity and greater ease in technical processes of re-formatting of content, it is undoubtedly much more feasible and more prevalent than before.

As far as effective management of media content assets in the digital age is concerned, the ascent of branding techniques to facilitate fuller exploitation of intellectual property makes a great deal of sense. Digital platforms bring not only opportunity but also a vast abundance of choice for consumers, and as a consequence rival media suppliers need, more than ever, a means to cut through the swathe and to engage and sustain audience attention for their own wares (Keller, 2013). Effective branding can also help extend the shelf-life of media content assets. This is important since, from a business point of view, the core challenge for media suppliers and brand owners is that of keeping their content properties going and selling them through as many avenues as possible for as long as possible in order to achieve a return sufficient to cover and exceed the cost of developing them in the first place.

So harnessing branding techniques is highly beneficial from the point of view of firms seeking to exploit as fully as possible the value of their content assets across digital platforms. However, from a socio-cultural perspective, the implications are perhaps a little more questionable. Findings from our case study based research into the experience of UK media companies suggest that a drive towards multi-platform delivery has been accompanied by a need for greater selectivity in content decisions with much more emphasis on potentially high impact content proposals. In other words, migration to a multi-platform approach has resulted in at least some forms of pressures *against* rather than in favour of diversity of content

Amongst UK broadcasters, a common strategic response to the problem of how to meet audience and advertiser demand for multi-layered multi-platform output from within static or diminishing content budgets in recent years has been to focus on fewer, high impact ideas (Doyle, 2010). This is true both of the commercial and the non-commercial sector. At the *BBC* for example, the mantra ‘fewer, bigger, better’ was adopted as part of the organisation’s efforts to restructure into a multi-media

entity. According to the Controller of *BBC Three*, budgetary constraints have created more focus on ‘curation’ of content and on squeezing as much value as possible from it. In terms of selecting which items of content to invest in, the challenging of supplying content across multiple platforms from within tight budgets:

is inevitably going to lead you to fewer, possibly bigger and hopefully bigger bang for your buck [acquisitions] (Interview, January 22, 2014)

As print publishers mutate into digital multi-platform players, production has become orientated towards supplying multiple versions out of the same individual narratives, stories, content properties and brands (Fenton, 2010). Investment in new content management systems (CMSs) has made re-versioning of content for different platforms easier (Doyle, 2014). The journey to multi-platform publishing has naturally precipitated converged production practices plus more emphasis on the sort of content that engages audiences across platforms, as confirmed by the CEO of *Hearst UK*:

the job of a journalist and content is really to be able to engage with the audience on every platform. So yes, it has an impact on the [volume] of information produced in the job and on diversity. (Interview, July 22, 2013)

So, as earlier research has suggested, rather than supporting greater diversity, multi-platform distribution is apt to encourage strategies of brand extension and, in turn, the ‘market ubiquity of a limited number of franchises’ (Murray, 2005, p. 431).

7 Brands and Efficiency

International and multi-platform expansion of successful media content properties has become increasingly prevalent and branding is central to this. Once publishers succeed in developing and perfecting a leading product in the home market, the next step is often to extend the brand internationally through publication of multiple international editions of the magazine adapted suitably in each case for local market circumstances. So, although the literature of international management provides numerous stark warnings about the difficulties of sustaining transnational business alliances, the track record of companies such as *Bauer*, *Hachette Filipacchi* and *Hearst* in developing magazine brands that achieve positions of market leadership right across the globe suggests that, at least in publishing, cross-border partnerships can work highly effectively (Doyle, 2006). This is, perhaps, not surprising given the high financial rewards available to both the brand owner and local publishing partners once a magazine title is successfully translated into new geographic territories.

Cross-platform expansion is another tactic that is increasingly deployed in order to maximise the returns from a popular magazine brand. Again, adaptation is necessary, in this case to suit the strengths and specificities of the delivery platform in question. The expertise that most magazine publishers have established in

targeting, building relationships with and engaging narrow audience segments is certainly a useful advantage in the context of digital distribution platforms. It is notable that while magazine publishers such as *EMAP* were early in adopting a ‘media neutral’ approach towards content delivery, many other media suppliers are now following suit in identifying themselves not purely as broadcasters or publishers but rather as content brand owners and multi-platform distributors.

Multi-platform expansion is increasingly central to the strategies of media companies and, as this chapter argues, successful use of branding in order to engage audiences effectively and to secure a prominent presence across digital platforms forms a core part of this. The need for high impact brands is affecting how content is selected, produced and presented, with practical and theoretical implications for processes of production, content selection and distribution. Whether the ascent of branding is conducive to an improved experience for media audiences is a debatable question. What is clear, however, is that the deployment of branding to support expansion strategies will continue into the future, not least because maximising the available market for the firm’s output is an obvious economic goal for all media content creators and brand owners.

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